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LOCAL

St. Olaf student protests sexual misconduct policy with T-shirt

The private college in Northfield insists that it's doing its best to crack down on sexual assault, but it is asking the federal government to review how the college handles those complaints.

By Maura Lerner (<http://www.startribune.com/maura-lerner/10645281/>) and Mary Lynn Smith (<http://www.startribune.com/mary-lynn-smith/10645991/>) Star Tribune

APRIL 7, 2016 — 7:15AM

Madeline Wilson has been raising eyebrows at St. Olaf College with her T-shirt: "Ask me how my college is protecting my rapist."

Wilson, a 22-year-old nursing student, says she was raped by another student in a dorm last May. She blames the school for clearing him in a campus investigation that she believes was deeply flawed; and now she's going public with her frustration.

"I didn't want anyone else to go through the same thing," Wilson said this week. [She created a website \(https://mycollegeisprotectingrapists.wordpress.com/\)](https://mycollegeisprotectingrapists.wordpress.com/) to publicize her story.

The private college in Northfield insists that it's doing its best to crack down on sexual assault, but in the wake of Wilson's campaign, it is asking the federal government to review how the college handles those complaints.

"We do the best job we know how to in this challenging area," college President David Anderson wrote in a campus e-mail on Saturday. But, he acknowledged, "no process is perfect." A closed meeting Wednesday night between students and administrators was expected to focus on sexual assault and harassment on campus.

The case, which is getting national attention, is the most visible example in Minnesota of the growing national debate over sexual assault on campus. Across the country, colleges and universities — which are required by law to investigate such incidents — are finding themselves criticized by both sides — either for going too easy on perpetrators, or for running roughshod over the rights of the accused.

In February, a male student sued Macalester College after it launched a sexual assault investigation against him, claiming that the process "lacks even the most rudimentary due process protections for the accused." Macalester denied the charges. The student dropped the lawsuit, and quit college a month later.

At St. Olaf, Wilson argues that the college should have done more to protect her from the man she calls the perpetrator. St. Olaf officials won't comment about Wilson's case specifically. But her own account illustrates the dilemma colleges face as they try to sort through the sometimes murky details when one student accuses another of sexual misconduct.

Wilson says the rape occurred last May, the week before finals, but she waited until September to report it to the college, and until December to report it to police.

Why the delay? "At the time, I couldn't have coped with it," she said. "I just mentally smothered it as much as possible." She admits she was intoxicated at the time; so much so, she said, that she was in no condition to consent to sex. But she remembers telling the student "no."

That summer, she said, when she finally told a friend what happened, "I realized, wow, if anyone else had described the situation to me, I would have said immediately, that's rape."

She filed a formal complaint when she returned to campus, she said, hoping that a campus investigation "would bring me closure."



■ Video (02:25) : Madeline Wilson started raising eyebrows at St. Olaf College with a



KYNDELL HARKNESS

■ Gallery: Gallery: Sexual assault awareness at St. Olaf

She's careful not to identify the accused student by name. But after she accused him of rape, she says, he hired private investigators to question friends and co-workers about her, and in the process, publicly revealed details about the rape complaint. Eventually, she said, a college dean determined there was not sufficient evidence of sexual misconduct, and the investigation was closed.

In December, she filed a sexual assault report with the Northfield police. That investigation is still open.

A list of demands

The T-shirt campaign, Wilson said, was a way to "take control of what happened to me." She said she was inspired by the "Carry That Weight" project by Emma Sulkowicz, a student at Columbia University in New York who hauled her mattress through campus for years to protest the school's refusal to expel the man she accused of rape.

"I thought ... well, I can't carry a mattress around," said Wilson, who is from Colorado. Instead, she launched the website on March 30 and donned the T-shirt, which she has worn to class almost every day since.

Senior Adrian Benjamin joined Wilson's campaign because he, too, was a survivor of sexual assault, and had reported his attack to college officials two years ago, he said on campus Wednesday. He said he only learned the outcome of the investigation when he got a copy of an email clearing the other student of wrongdoing. "It felt like a congratulations letter to my assailant," he said. "I don't want this to happen to another student."

The group's website [includes a list of demands](https://mycollegeisprotectingrapists.wordpress.com/our-demands/) (<https://mycollegeisprotectingrapists.wordpress.com/our-demands/>), including ensuring "that survivors are not forced to remain on campus with their assailants." They also want St. Olaf to explicitly prohibit sexual encounters unless participants give "verbal affirmative consent."

Vice President Jo Beld, who oversees sexual misconduct investigations at St. Olaf, said some of the demands are counterproductive — she notes that requiring "verbal" consent could redefine many romantic encounters as sexual assault.

At the same time, she said, St. Olaf is continually refining its sexual misconduct process to keep up with evolving federal and state standards. And that includes, she noted, protecting the rights of the accused. "We are legally obligated to provide a fair and equitable process," she said. "I think the message they're conveying is that the system is broken and needs to be fixed, and I don't believe the system is broken."

Wilson, who graduates next month, sees it differently. She said she's been overwhelmed with feedback from students, faculty and alumni who identify with her struggle and encourage her to fight on. "It's just been really heartening, and also saddening, to see that we're not the only ones that feel this way," she said.

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LEILA NAVIDI, STAR TRIBUNE

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